

Changing Course on Missile Defense: Why Refusing to Pick a Fight with Moscow Is Not a Sign of Weakness

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The Obama administration's decision not to place missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic provides an interesting view into the work in progress that is the Obama administration's foreign policy regarding Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. It is also perhaps the first indication that administration's famous "reset" button with Russia is more than just talk.

The missile defense system as initially proposed was presented by the Bush administration as a way to help protect American allies from any threat from Iran's developing nuclear weapons program. Moscow, however, viewed the proposed deployment as further efforts by the U.S. to humiliate and surround Russia. Inevitably, missile defense became part of the range of disagreements, which also include Georgia and the South Caucasus, the Manas Air Force Base and, probably most importantly, NATO expansion, between the two countries.

Obama's decision to stop pursuing this is being described by critics as [surrendering](#) to Russia and a sign of the American president's weakness. When viewed through the narrow lens of competition and machismo, this is not an unreasonable conclusion, but when the lens is expanded to include the actual interests of the U.S. and its allies, things look a little different.

The decision on missile defense, while obviously well received in Moscow, does not mean the U.S. has surrendered anything, nor given in to Russian pressure. The likely capabilities of Iran's weapons program, unnecessarily stressing an already tense relationship with Russia while gaining little, and the often overlooked [unpopularity of the program in Poland and particularly the Czech Republic](#) are all solid, rational reasons for abandoning this program. The reasons for supporting the program have gradually become less clear. In many respects, the most compelling reason for the missile defense plan was that changing course would be seen as giving in to Russia.

While standing up to Russia is often important and necessary, doing it simply for its own sake is not. Obama has made it clear that there are some issues important to Russia on which his administration will not be flexible. Obama's support for Georgia and refusal to even consider recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia are examples of the new administration pursuing the right policy in the region in spite of Russian disapproval.

Obama's support for Georgia has been a particular problem for the Kremlin who may have misguidedly thought the new American president would be less supportive of that country. The lack of ambiguity in the U.S. position was made evident shortly after the

Obama-Medvedev summit in Moscow when Vice-President Biden travelled to Tbilisi specifically to make the U.S. commitment to Georgia, which had been reiterated in Moscow, clear. This trip was so successful in this regard that Georgia's mercurial president Mikheil Saakashvili went so far as to state that Biden's trip had "[foiled](#)" Russia's plans to attack Georgia again. Just to make the point more clear, Biden gave a wide ranging [interview to the Wall Street Journal](#) on the way back from Tbilisi that spelled out some of the key and highly critical assumptions underpinning Obama's Russia policy.

In many respects, Obama's decision on missile defense is part of a broader trend of a foreign policy that is less about positioning, or bluster and more about outcomes than that of his predecessor. Refusing to pick a fight with Moscow for its own sake is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign that U.S. foreign policy is moving back to being driven by rational policy considerations, rather than being consumed by ideological narratives. American politicians have learnt that Barack Obama should not be underestimated. It does not seem that the Kremlin has figured this out yet, but it would be a mistake for those in the Kremlin, or anywhere else, to view this reasonable and practical decision by the U.S. that happens to please Moscow as a sign of weakness or surrender.